

The Gospel According to Stephen Colbert, Madeleine L'Engle and Shawn Kirchner

Galatians 6:9, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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It was five years ago this past week that I became a widow. Five years and there still isn't a day I don't think about how I wish it had turned out differently. Add a pandemic to this story and now I'm not just a woman living alone, I am also working remotely ...separated from the people I love and who give meaning to my life. I'm not telling you this because I want your pity. I'm telling you this because it has been a year that has accentuated our losses....for all of us....whatever our living circumstances -- widowed, divorced, single, married, unable to see children or parents, grandchildren or grandparents, living in a retirement community but needing to stay in our rooms for all meals or trying to raise small children without the usual support systems or needing space from family while trapped together in the same small bubble. Add to that loss of health, loss of a job or death of a loved one. This has been a year of loss and suffering for every person on the planet.

The fact that this is a global phenomenon means that we are all navigating this strange time no matter where we live or our circumstances. We humans are suffering this pandemic together....while alone and apart from each other.

Two-thirds of Americans believe that Covid-19 is a message from God. But what is the message? Only 11% understand it as a punishment. Thank God that the usual level of vitriolic judgementalism about this pandemic being God's punishment has been missing from the airwaves. Most people of faith are approaching the pandemic with heartfelt questions. It has been a year of soul-searching individually and corporately. Why did this occur? How do we make sense of it? How has the pandemic changed us? What has this year of suffering taught us about ourselves and about God? Who do we need to be going forward?

A couple months before my husband, Bryan, died our son, Matt emailed me an article about Stephen Colbert. It was a profile on Colbert right before he became host of The Late Show. It wasn't a fluff piece. It was a long article. The journalist who wrote it commented on how it surprised even him that the article turned out to be about loss and change and what we make of it.

Stephen Colbert is the youngest of eleven children and when he was 10 his father and his two next oldest brothers died in a plane crash. The rest of his siblings were grown and out of the house. So that just left Stephen and his mother at home. He was traumatized and forever changed. He said that when he was 35, he came to the realization that he had to learn to love that which he most wished had not happened in his life. He didn't want it to lose his father and his brothers, but it is our choice whether

to hate something in our lives or to love every moment of them, even the parts that bring us pain.

After I read the article I said to my husband, "Can I read you this article Matt sent me?" Like Stephen Colbert, Bryan lost his father when Bryan was 10 years-old and the only child still left at home. I wondered what he would think of Colbert's take on loss and what we make of it. When I finished reading it Bryan was weeping. I began to apologize for reading him the article and he said, "Don't be sorry. Just read it to me again."

Over the last five years, I have reread that article many, many times. Anderson Cooper, a primary anchor on CNN, who also lost his father at age 10, was so moved by the article he did a television interview of Colbert. It shows two men who experienced the same loss, two wounded souls discussing loss and how to make sense of it. At one point, Colbert says to Cooper, "It is a gift to exist and with existence comes suffering, there is no escaping that."

We will all die someday and before we do, we will lose one person or many who matter to us. It is the truth of being alive. It makes me think of the scripture that Juliet read to us today from Ecclesiastes. "For everything there is a season and time for every matter under heaven." In our lifetimes we will have sunrises and sunsets, joys and sorrows, sickness and health, life and death, ups and downs, planting and harvesting, laughing and crying. It doesn't matter how well educated you are or how much money you make or how altruistic you are or how much you follow the rules, we will all die and we will all suffer loss. It is just the fact of living.

The author of Ecclesiastes, who we will call The Preacher, has a pessimistic view of our time on this Earth -- think Murphy's Law -- "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.". The Preacher writes, "...the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all". The New Testament equivalent would be, "Rain falls on the good and evil alike." Ecclesiastes advice is: "Since life is in essence senseless, go ahead and eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you will die."

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes was stating what we all know academically. Dawna said it in her sermon two weeks ago, "None of us is getting out of this alive." What makes me read the same article over and over again is that Colbert takes a long hard look at his suffering and loss and doesn't end up resigned. He has learned to embrace the very thing he wish had never happened. Five years out and I'm still confounded by the beauty of that decision.

In the article Colbert quotes J.R. Tolkien, author of the Lord of the Rings series: "What punishments from God are not gifts?" When I first read that quote, I interpreted Tolkien's meaning to be that our losses are punishments from God and we should find the giftedness in them. That is not an understanding of God I can square with anything else I know. I learned later that Tolkien penned those words in response to a query from

a reader about his characters in the Lord of the Rings books. Tolkien compares the mortality of humans to the immortality of his Elf characters who actually covet mortality. Tolkien says that humans have a higher destiny than elves, who never die. Tolkien writes: "...the Creator will make "punishments" (that is, changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained." Out of loss comes blessing. Out of suffering we glimpse the depth of love.

Stephen Colbert says it like this:

We're asked to accept the world that God gives us. And to accept it with love. If God is everywhere, and God is in everything, then the world as it is is all just an expression of God and his love. And you have to accept it with gratitude....You have to be grateful for all of it. You can't pick and choose what you're grateful for. So what do you get from loss? You get awareness of other people's loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply and to understand what it's like to be a human being...

That is how Colbert has learned to love the very thing in his life he most wish had never happened. That is how he made the choice to embrace the most painful thing in his life for out of it has come a deeper love, a deeper connection....it has shaped him. Many years ago, I heard Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, speak. One thing she said resonated deep in my bones. She said, "If you dig down deep enough you will always find love at the foundation." If find it in the lyrics of Shawn Kirchner's song, *Holy World*:

And I have seen how hopes slip away,
Slips away like shifting sand—
Only to reveal:
The rock, and a place to stand.
Holy world, holy world,
Where sorrows are turning with joy.

This pandemic has brought our losses front and center. It has required us to turn them over and over and study them once again....to dig down deep and see what we find below them....to ask ourselves what we will do with this one wild and precious life we have been given. Can we take what life gives us and embrace life in all its fullness...the seeking and the losing, the dancing and the mourning, the reaping and the sowing? Can we witness our sorrows turning with joy?

Now I want to be clear that I am not saying that suffering is a virtue, in and of itself. I am not saying that the person with the most adversity in this life wins or is the most evolved. No. I am saying that there is sacredness even in our suffering. The question is: Can we embrace life in its fullness....all of it....in all its varied seasons? Can we see giftedness in all experiences? Can we take this past year and find the goodness, the love, the beauty in even it? Can we see how it shapes us and embrace it?

This past weekend my son Brett came for a whirlwind visit. He wasn't even here for two full days. We packed a lot of living into those few hours. Because of the pandemic,

Brett and I hadn't been together at my house since October. Of course, I had things I needed him to do for me (which he graciously did) but we talked more deeply than we ever have. We each shared what we had learned in this pandemic year. We talked about the loss of his father and how Bryan's life gifted us both. We reflected on how the suffering and isolation of this past year has taught us the importance of now. We dug down deep and love gushed up all over us....our sorrow turned with joy. Amen.

Is this also the story of Jesus?

Benediction

It is a gift just to exist in all of the varied seasons
Of this holy, holy world.
Embrace this life and all the ways it shapes you
And the God of love will be found in all of it.
Amen.